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A Positive Approach: ***State Adopts Program to Ease Shortage of Teachers***

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Virginia, like many other states, is experiencing a shortage of teachers. If current trends continue, by 2015 the commonwealth's 132 school divisions will be in the position of trying to educate 76,000 additional students with about 3,400 fewer teachers.

The shortage is the result of some fairly simple arithmetic. While the number of students is growing, colleges and universities are graduating fewer new teachers. In 2000, Virginia's teacher preparation programs graduated 1,000 fewer new teachers than in 1999. If past history is a guide, about half of these new teachers chose to begin their careers in other states. This is not surprising considering how Virginia has slipped in rank in terms of how well it compensates teachers compared with other states. The Old Dominion now ranks fifth in the South and border states, behind Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and North Carolina.

Attrition exacerbates the math, especially in high-poverty urban and rural school divisions. Experienced teachers migrate to higher-paying divisions with less stressful working conditions and some new teachers, after a year or two in the classroom, seek higher-paying careers in other fields.

The resulting teacher shortage is especially severe in special education, mathematics, science, foreign languages, technology, and increasingly, reading. Remote school divisions, such as those in Southwestern Virginia, struggle to find teachers for all subject areas. A 2001 survey of Virginia school divisions found more than 4,000 vacancies and teachers teaching outside their area of expertise or endorsement.

The Career Switcher Program

Virginia has taken steps to reduce the shortage of qualified teachers. The Career Switcher program, which allows men and women with the appropriate academic credentials to enter the classroom without completing a traditional teacher-preparation program has put more than 200 quality teachers in Virginia classrooms. The state also offers eligible students in teacher-preparation programs scholarship loans of up to \$3,720. These scholarship loans are forgiven for students who teach in a Virginia public school for at least four semesters in a critical shortage field.

While these programs have helped, more must be done if all of Virginia's children are to receive the quality instruction that only a highly qualified teacher can provide.

Raising teacher salaries is an obvious first step. It's been more than ten years since the last significant effort on the part of the state to increase teacher salaries. But given Virginia's deepening budget crisis, the prospect of the General Assembly providing a meaningful across-the-board salary increase for teachers, as it did during the late 1980s and early 1990s, seems remote.

So, what can be done? The Committee to Enhance the K-12 Teaching Profession in Virginia in its report, *Stepping up the Plate ... Virginia's Commitment to a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom*, has outlined a plan to address the issues that have created the teacher shortage. And, thanks to a three-year \$13.5 million dollar grant from the United States Department of Education, many of the recommendations in the report can be put into action, despite the state's budget woes.

Tracking, Predicting Shortages

One key recommendation is to improve the state's ability to track and predict shortages in subject areas and geographic regions through the development of a comprehensive database on teacher quality. Accurate and up-to-date information is essential to develop effective strategies for recruiting and training highly qualified teachers. Good policymaking must be guided by hard evidence and the fact of the matter is that today, the state lacks the ability to track teacher shortages and the qualifications of instructional personnel.

Reliable data will allow the state and school divisions to anticipate shortages of qualified teachers. The database that will be developed through the federal grant also will allow teacher preparation programs at the colleges and universities to respond to current and anticipated shortages. The database also will enhance accountability by providing hard evidence on the effectiveness of teacher education programs and student achievement. The committee recommends the development of an incentive-based system to reward teacher education programs that are responsive to the needs of school divisions and whose graduates prove their effectiveness in raising student achievement. The effort would coincide with measures to ensure that teacher preparation programs are aligned the state's standards for instruction and licensure.

The grant also will allow Virginia to move forward with the development of a three-tiered licensure system. A system that provides incentives and career opportunities for outstanding teachers to remain in the classroom will help reduce attrition, especially among teachers who do not wish to become administrators.

In addition to providing incentives to experienced teachers, the committee recommends the improvement and expansion of mentoring programs designed to deal with the isolation new teachers often feel when they close their classroom doors. The recommendation goes beyond the simple idea of a “buddy system.” Virginia will develop standards for the mentoring of new teachers, guidelines for the implementation of mentoring programs, and a system to evaluate their effectiveness.

'Teach for Tomorrow' Plan

Another innovative strategy recommended by the committee is to create partnerships between institutions of higher education and hard-pressed rural school divisions to help the communities these divisions serve “grow their own” teachers. These “Teach for Tomorrow” programs would encourage middle and high school students to explore teaching as a career path.

It is true, that until budgetary prospects brighten, state-level action to increase compensation for teachers is unlikely. But teachers should know efforts to enhance the teaching profession are not on hold. Important steps will be taken during the next three years to implement the Committee to Enhance the K-12 Teaching Profession’s report. And that’s good news for teachers and students.

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